

Makerere Dreams: Language and New Frontiers of Knowledge

By Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o¹

I feel truly grateful for the honor you have conferred on me by bringing me back to the scene of so many incredible memories. It was on this Hill where, year after year, beginning in 1961, we celebrated the realization of a dream fought for in the streets of Dar, Nairobi and Kampala for over sixty years. The Makerere Students Guild, with its tradition of free and fair elections on the basis of one person one vote, had already undermined the colonial practices and therefore anticipated this moment. What the Guild had done for students would now be the norm for the three countries. Tanzania and Uganda were the first to get their independence; but when finally Kenya came into the mix, we spilled into the streets of Kampala: in euphoria we allowed ourselves to imagine an imminent East African Federation.

The imagined had been given credence by the physical proximity of Nyerere, Kenyatta and Obote at a joint rally in Kampala, earlier, and to which we had danced, singing along with the masses of the three territories:

Tulimtuma Nyerere

Kwa Uhuru,

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Kenya Uganda Tanganyika,

Sisi twasaidiana

We would put the names of the other two leaders, Kenyatta, and Obote in turn. Why not? On the Hill, we had lived as East Africans, electing our leadership without regard to their regional origins. Nyerere had once promised to delay the independence of the then Tanganyika to await that of the other two if such a move would accelerate a federation. That did not happen. But now, with Kenya's independence after a ten year bloody war, what was once in song seemed about to become material reality.

Wordsworth better sums up the moment for those of us on the Hill at the time:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

His words were in welcome of the French revolution and the future it seemed to herald; ours was in welcome of East African Union and the future it heralded.

This anniversary is then also that of a great moment in our history as East Africans; a time when we dared to dream big; a time of magic transformations. Clearly, the magic rubbed on me. I entered Makerere in July 1959, a colonial subject of white settler state, and left in 1964, a citizen of an independent black Republic. During the same period, Makerere changed from a colonial appendage of the University of London into an independent institution, the University of East Africa.

The University of East Africa born on 28th June 1963 was formally dissolved on July 1 1970 but I like to think of it as transformation into three national

universities, Nairobi and Dar, which in turn spawned more colleges and universities in East Africa. Whatever the changes in the quantity and even quality of these institutions, they shared certain continuities because of their roots in the Makerere intellectual tradition. Most of their faculty were Makerere graduates. But the one continuity that unites them most had origins in the University of East Africa: the degree certificates of the new dispensation would no longer draw their legitimacy from their appendage London.

So to celebrate this historic moment of transformation of this great institution is also to commemorate a great achievement by every measure possible. Among its distinguished alumina, this institution boasts of Presidents, Prime Ministers, Doctors, Agriculturists, Professors, Diplomats, Writers, Musicians, Artists, sportsmen and women who span every region of Africa and the globe.

I have been to regions of the world I thought were off the beaten track, only to bump into some Makerereans. I was reminded of this last night on my way here from South California via London. I had just entered the business lounge of the British airlines at Heathrow airport feeling a little worn out as a result of a sleepless night across the Atlantic, when my eye caught an African person about to take his fruit salad. We nodded at each other, started talking. His name was Dr Jones KYAZZE, former UNESCO representative to United Nations and presently a member of Mutesa 1 Royal University Council. He was returning from a Rotary International Convention, in Lisbon and so, like me, was in transit. Guess what! He joined Makerere two years after I left; and he was a Northcorter like me. But unlike

me whose degree certificate still said University of London, his was fully from the University of East Africa.

This global spread of Makerere students used to be well recorded in the Makerere newsletter that Margaret MacPherson maintained for years; her passing on was a loss of a Makerere personality, an editor and a registrar of a scholarship which has made and continues to make significant mark in Africa and the world. It is scholarship born of a century of dreams that has been Makerere since its foundation in 1922.

It was the site of political dreams. Because it brought into one Campus students from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, even Zimbabwe, Makerere was the perfect place from which to launch our dreams not only of an East African Union but that of a politically and economically united Africa which seek its economic, political, cultural and psychological legitimacy within its being and not from its being an appendage to the West.

Makerere was also the site of literary dreams. The Kenya I came from was under a state of emergency with the dead and the tortured often lying in the streets. We lived under what Fanon calls a nervous condition of the colonized in a white settler town, a graveyard of many dreams. Makerere opened the space of my imagination. It was here, on this Hill, that I wrote my first two novels, *Weep not Child* and *The River Between*, and numerous short stories. My play, *The Black Hermit*, was written for the specific purpose of celebrating Uganda's independence. Makerere made the writer in me.

I was not alone: I was part of a group that included John Nagenda, Peter Nazareth, Jonathan Kariara, Bhahadur Tejani, David Rubadiri, Micere Mugo to cite a few, who wrote stories and poems and essays for the English Department's magazine Penpoint. The fact is that nearly all the East African writers of my generation were Makerere products.

In addition to spawning East African writers, this Hill hosted the historic gathering of African writers of English expression in June 1962. They came from all corners of the continent: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J P Clark and Christopher Okigbo from Nigeria; Lewis Nkosi, Eski'a Mphahlele, Arthur Mamaine, Bloke Modisane from South Africa; with John Nagenda, Jonathan Kariara, Rajat Neogy and I representing East Africa. In attendance were also Langston Hughes from America and Arthur Drayton from the Caribbean, giving the gathering a truly Pan African dimension. There had been great gathering of black writers before but they met everywhere else but Africa, Rome in 1956 and Paris in 1959. Makerere's was the first ever gathering of black writers in Africa.

These writers would later give us what's the nearest thing to a genuine Pan African intellectual article: the book, African literature. When Achebe passed on recently he was mourned all over the continent. His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the text most discussed at the conference alongside that of Dennis Brutus of South Africa, is read in all Africa. The work of others like Okot p'Bitek and Wole Soyinka, and that of the generations that have followed, Dangarembga, Ngozi Adichie and Doreen Baingana are equally well received as belonging to all Africa. Thus if

Makerere was the site and symbol of an East African intellectual community, it also marked the birth of literary Pan-Africanism.

It was at the conference that the questions of who we are as Africans, nationals, continentals, or even diasporics, was raised; It so happened that every single participant in that Makerere event wrote in English; the product of our imagination derived its legitimacy from the linguistic appendage to London. The physical empire may have come to an end but the very success of that conference marked the triumph of the metaphysical empire.

The colonizer's language is at the heart of their metaphysical empire for language is the vehicle through which the mind voices thought. So it is not just creative writing and literature. By its language choice the scholarship that has emerged since our formal declaration of academic independence from London has continued being an integral part of the European metaphysical empire.

At this 50th anniversary it behooves us, the inheritors and custodians of that scholarship, to glance at the implications of that continued appendage to the empire of European sounds.

I have argued elsewhere that scholarship, any scholarship, is not a neutral activity, even in its conceptual vocabulary. No matter in whose hands, scholarship impacts how people look and view social reality, including history and culture. For centuries, cartographers conditioned people to think that Africa is smaller than Europe. Some, in the West, often talk of the continent as a country. Yet as some maps have shown, Africa is bigger than a combination of Europe, USA, China, India, Argentina, and New Zealand put together.

Scholarship started and helped perpetuate the notion of Africa north of Sahara, including Egypt as European, and the South as being Africa proper, the horde of tribes in perpetual warfare. Hegel emphatically declared that history, the enlightenment of reason and science, had bypassed his proper Africa which remained enveloped in the dark mantle of the night, an image no doubt arising from his reading of colonial travel narratives that talked about Dark or Darkest Africa. Hegel's image becomes a truth in the grandiloquent stupidity of Trevor Roper of Oxford when in the 1960's he claimed that Africa had only darkness to exhibit prior to European colonial presence. Since darkness was not a subject of history, the history of Africa begun with European colonialism. Some of these attitudes have changed in large part because of enlightened scholarship, but still, the nomenclature of North and South of the Sahara, and the vocabulary of warring tribes, have become enshrined in the annals of scholarship and popular parlance. An article describing my coming here for this event had to specify that I was from Kikuyu tribe.

The continued evaluation of events in Africa through the prism of the tribe, tribes and tribesmen, masks and distorts the real issues driving African realities. First is the differential definition of communities. Why are a quarter million Icelanders a nation; and ten million Ibos, a tribe, or 4 million Danes a nation; and twenty million Yorubas, a tribe? Even when scholars and journalists don't use the word nation in reference to European peoples, they at least refer to them by the names they call themselves. Thus they talk about the English, the Germans, the French, the Chinese, or simply, Chinese people, English people. But when it comes to Africa the words tribe and tribesmen must be appended to the reference. An Englishman gets a nobel prize in chemistry. He is

rightfully referred to as Mr So and so, an English man or woman. An African gets a nobel prize in chemistry, and he is editorialized as Mr so and so, an X or Y tribesman or tribeswoman. In other continents, heads of government are referred as Presidents and Prime Ministers of their specific countries. African heads of state must be editorialized as President so and so an x or y Tribesman. In the world of their language, there are humans and tribes.

A recent Reuter's news service piece even talked about tribal blood!! What color is tribal blood or bloodshed? The word is so tainted by its colonial usage that whatever cognitive scientific meaning it might once have had, has all been but subsumed under its pejorative colonial umbrella.

The word has become a code. Once the readers see it, they assume that the actors are doing whatever they are, because of an inherent tribal mark in their character. In the process the real issues of governance, democracy, patterns of property ownership and economic control, uneven regional development, corruption, get lost. It is as if a particular person is corrupt because of his genetic pool, labeled tribe.

This vocabulary, permeating European studies of Africa to this day, was invented by colonial Anthropology, in its beginnings at least, which saw itself as the study of the insider by the outsider, for the consumption of fellow outsider. The anthropologist of the colonial invention gathered information and put it in his language and we cannot blame him for that.

What we can question is the fact that our various fields of knowledge of Africa are in many ways rooted in the entire colonial tradition of the outsider looking in, gathering and coding knowledge with the help of native informants, and then storing the

final product in a European language for consumption by those who have access to it. In other words, we still collect intellectual items and put them in European language museums and archives and people have to dig into those languages in order to access knowledge about themselves. Our knowledge of Africa is largely filtered through European languages and their vocabulary. Is it not time that our scholarship stopped finding legitimacy in European languages in the same way that Makerere, as an institution, stopped deriving its legitimacy from appendage to London?

At a recent conference in Leeds, attended by more than a hundred scholars, I wanted to know how many of them, African and non-African alike, that had ever written even a single document in an African language. Or how many researchers had even retained the original field notes in words spoken by the primary informant? Only three hands were raised for those who had written a page: for more than a page, not one hand was raised. It is a question that I have asked at Port Harcourt in Nigeria; at the University of Nairobi; and at many such gatherings and I get similar results. To that question I then add another: Can you imagine a Professor of French history who did not know a word of French? This nearly always produces laughter, almost as if the ludicrousness of it is so obvious!

But in the case of Africa, either on the continent or abroad, one can get employment as an African specialist without having to demonstrate any competence in any African language. I have seen prizes announced specifically for the promotion of African literature. But only on condition that the entries are not in an African language. Can you imagine the horror that it would raise among the French if someone offered them a prize for the promotion of French literature but only on

condition that the participants wrote it in isiZulu? Unfortunately even within the continent we have come to accept the view that what's African is only so if it is in English or French. Both African and non-African scholars can claim to be specialists of this or that aspect of African history, culture, society, politics, without accepting the linguistic challenge and the responsibility. Africinity needs European validation.

When Makerere school of fine art was first founded, it used to import clay from London. Good art could only come out of European soil. It was only when artists like Elimo Njau, Sam Ntiro and Maloba came to the scene that they said: let the children paint; let them sculpt. Let them use whatever material is around them including Banana leaves. Thus begun a kind of renaissance of contemporary East African art.

In the same way that Uganda soil was thought incapable of making good art, there are those who will argue that African languages are incapable of handling complexities of social thought, that, like their speakers, African languages are riddled with poverty. The irony is that English and French had to overcome similar claims of inadequacy as vehicles for philosophy and scientific thought as against the then dominant Latin. But the commitment of their intellectuals and States changed all that perception. African languages need a similar commitment from African intellectuals, bearing in mind that no language had a monopoly of cognitive vocabulary, that every language, as Cheikh A Diop once argued, could develop its terms for science and technology.

Other cynics will respond and assert that an African language cannot sustain a written intellectual production. How come that four million Danes can have libraries and bookshops stuck with books in their language and ten million Africans cannot? Icelanders who number about two hundred and fifty thousand, have one of the most flourishing

intellectual productions in Europe. What a quarter of a million people can, surely ten million people can also. Today we talk of Greek and Latin intellectual heritage and forget that these productions were city in origins. The vaunted Italian renaissance and its rich and varied heritage in the arts and architecture and learning were largely from the different regions of Italy: Rome, Florence, Mantua, Venice and Genoa. What the vernaculars of these city states, principalities and regions by way of intellectual production have been able to do, can be done by any other similarly situated languages.

The question remains: what would be the place of European languages in African scholarship? No matter how we may think of the historical process by which they came to occupy they place they now do in our lives, it is a fact that European languages (principally English, French and Portuguese) carry immense deposits of some the best in literary and general African thought. They are granaries of African intellectual productions. These languages have enabled a common visibility of African presence in contemporary global culture. These languages also enable conversation in a gathering like this with attendants from different regions and language groups. But it's only because we all had to learn them, we have use them: There is nothing inherently global and universal about them. They happen to be the languages of power.

But the concept of enabling defines best the mission we should assign to French and English. Use them to enable dialogue among African languages and visibility of African languages in the community of world languages instead of their being a tool of disabling by uprooting intellectuals and their production from their original language base. Use English and French to enable and not to disable.

As African scholars, we cannot afford to be intellectual outsiders in our own land. We must re-connect with the buried alluvium of African memory and use it as a base for the further engagement with the world. African intellectuals must do for their languages and cultures what all other intellectuals in history have done for theirs. This then is the challenge of our scholarship today: How best to really connect with the African continent, in the era of globalization? Writing in them; scholarship in them, yes, but the question of dialogue among African languages through translations directly or via a third language is vital.

This can only result in the empowerment of African languages and cultures and make them pillars of a more self-confident Africa ready to engage in an equal give and take with the world.

If you know all the languages of the world and you don't know your mother tongue or the language of the culture of the community into which you are born, that is enslavement. But if you know your language and add all the languages of the world to it, that is empowerment. The choice for us is between intellectual enslavement and intellectual empowerment and of course I hope we choose the path of empowerment.

The scholar however cannot do this alone. He or she needs a publisher. Everybody knows how frustrating it is to write a manuscript and then have to put it on a shelf for lack of a publisher who is even willing to look at it. But the scholar and the publisher cannot do it alone. They need enlightened government language policies. Unfortunately even African governments are buying into the recipe for Africa intellectual suicide. I don't know how much the world and other monetary forces of globalization have to do with it, but African governments are turning their back on African languages.

They deny them resources, starve them to death where they don't strangle them outright. This is a far cry from the days of Kwame Nkrumah who on assuming power in Ghana in 1957 set up Bureau for African languages. Or of Julius Nyerere who did so much for Kiswahili in terms of policy but additionally did his bit in translating Shakespeare into Kiswahili. He was wrong in his attitude towards other African languages but still he did give Kiswahili the necessary power base. Nyerere of Makerere, was also the first and only Chancellor of the University of East Africa. Thus two of the most consistent proponents of African unity, Osagefyo Nkrumah and Mwalimu Nyerere, were also the leading advocates of positive policies regarding African languages. I wish each and every African country would emulate the idea of setting up a Central Bureau of African languages that would see into the development and relationships of African languages in their own country.

In the particular case of East Africa, I would like to see a three language policy: strengthen mother tongue as the foundation; add Kiswahili as the common language; and then English. In terms of books, I would love to see more translations among those three and of course between African languages as a whole.

Scholars of the new generation: let us extend the dream that was always Makerere and venture forth to open new frontiers of knowledge. Let Africa open new spaces in the economy, politics, and culture. Let Africa be at the forefront in the renaissance of a new more inclusive humanity. Let ourselves be the beginning of new selves. Then will our dreams merge with that millions of working people in our countries that Martin Carter, from Walter Rodney's country, once wrote about in his poem looking at your hands, people who do not sleep to dream but dream to change the world.

