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The Commitment of the Intellectual

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

We are proud to reproduce here an interview with the well-known Kenya author, made by Obi Bini, London, 3 May 1983.

QUESTION: You have devoted much effort at combating the cultural domination of the peoples of Africa. Why do you place so much emphasis on the struggles of the cultural front?

NGUGI: I think the cultural impact on Africa, on these countries which have been dominated by imperialism, has been under-emphasised, although it is so crucial in explaining the attitudes and struggles in Africa and the Third World today. The way I see it is this: imperialism has three basic aspects. The first and primary aspect is, of course, economic. Imperialism, during the colonial or neo-colonial stage, wants primarily to control the productive forces of the people, that is, the natural resources and what their labour produces.

But to control the people economically imperialism finds it necessary to have political control. That is, it imposes judicial systems, political systems, military systems and institutions designed to control people directly, particularly during the colonial stage. But in history, economic and political control have never been complete without cultural control. You see, in my view culture is the carrier of a people's values. And the values a people hold — as the basis of their self-identity as a people — is the basis of how they look at themselves collectively and individually in relationship to the universe. So the aim of cultural control is in fact to control how people look at themselves; to control the basis of their self-identity as a people.

Imperialism, of course, did this through educational institutions, through literature, religion, dances, everything. And they did this to make the colonised look at themselves through the cultural eyeglasses made in Europe. It has meant the colonised look at themselves through the eyes of the dominating nations, the dominating classes, and so on. If you look at yourself through the eyes of the person dominating you, then it means you are not really in a position to resist, or oppose him. That is why cultural control is so important. A slave is not a slave until he accepts that he is a slave.

Unfortunately, the colonial phase of imperialism did produce an African elite with the mentality that was in harmony with the needs of the ruling classes of the imperialist countries. And often it was this African elite, nurtured in the womb of

imperialism, with the cultural eyeglasses from Europe, that came to power or who held the reins of power during the neo-colonial phase of imperialism. And it means that this class, because of the cultural-mental outlook it took from the imperialist ruling classes, does not see any contradiction between itself and the needs of the ruling classes of the imperialist nations.

In fact that goes so far as to say that cultural control, as a means of economic and political control, is the most dominant factor, during the neo-colonial phase of imperialism, and we as an African people must address ourselves to this if we are really serious about the liberation of the productive forces of African people.

QUESTION: You said in one of your essays that African writers must become 'literally guerillas' in the people's struggles against imperialism. What does that mean for the African writer, and what are the demands on a writer choosing such a path?

NGUGI: First of all, what did I mean by this? Now, you find that in a situation where one race dominates another, and one nation dominates another, where one class dominates another, there are two types of intellectuals, broadly speaking. There are intellectuals of the dominating race, or the dominating nation, or the dominating class. And these intellectuals are not necessarily recruited from the dominating nation, race or class. They can be recruited from even among the members of the dominated nation, race or class. By this kind of intellectual, I mean the intellectual who rationalises a world view or an outlook which is in harmony with the needs and positions of the dominating nation, race or class. In other words, this kind of intellectual, whether he is conscious of it or not, is expressing a world view that does not contradict, or is not a threat to, the dominant position of that class, nation or race.

Now, put it this way: when for instance an intellectual argues that human nature does not change; even if he did not think that he was consciously defending the position of the dominating person, in that particular situation of the dominating and the dominated, the world view that nothing changes is philosophically in harmony with the needs of the dominating person who, of course, does not want to see any changes and therefore of course, views history, philosophy and education as a reflection of no need to change.

On the other hand, you get other intellectuals who express a world view which is in harmony with the needs and positions of the dominated class, race or nation: in other words, who rationalise a world view which reflects the need for change. And this need for change is not an abstraction for the person who is dominated, that is, for a person who has been set upon, it is part of the objective reality of that situation for him to want changes, whether he believes this change is possible or not. So, those intellectuals of the dominated classes or nations, of course, can also be recruited from any classes.

I was looking at colonial history and I saw that the colonising classes had in fact recruited many of their intellectuals from sons and daughters of peasants, from sons and daughters of factory workers. And you find these sons and daughters of factory workers with a university education really expressing a world view which in fact is in harmony with the needs of those who dominate their mothers, their fathers, their sisters, and so on. And they do not see that they themselves are in fact part and parcel of those forces now dominating their mothers, their sisters, their brothers.

But in the same way that imperialism has its intellectuals, the working class and peasantry have also their intellectuals. And it is necessary for an intellectual who really wants to contribute to the liberation of the African people — that is, the liberation of their productive forces and their genius — to put his intellectual resources at the service of the people; to make sure that whatever he articulates, in writing, in lectures, in essays, everywhere is in harmony with the needs of the struggling classes in Africa — that is, their struggle for the liberation of their productive forces so that he who produces is he who controls that which he produces.

QUESTION: A writer could produce creative works or other intellectual works that accurately and correctly articulate the needs and positions of the working classes and advocate change in their circumstances. Is that enough?

NGUGI: It is important that the writer is able to do this. It is very, very important. In fact if they were able to do this, if the majority of intellectuals in Africa who had been to universities, schools and so on were to do this, that would be a very important step. That would be a revolutionary step. But in fact, in my view there has not been enough of this kind of person who can accurately, correctly and artistically reflect the needs of the struggling people. Of course if you were to accurately describe, and accurately take the position of the struggling masses, this would inevitably lead you to a choice of options as to where to work, with whom to work, whether to work with the masses or with those exploiting the masses and so on. So I think that step of accurately reflecting the needs of the struggling masses is very, very important and can guide the intellectual in his choice of actions.

QUESTION: In your book *Detained*, you said that you learned more from the experience of working with the peasants and workers in the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre than your years in the universities. Can you explain that?

NGUGI: Whenever some people have read that particular statement, they have tended to say: 'You must be joking. Learning from peasants and workers? What can they teach you?' But the fact is, you look at colonial education, it tended to alienate the educated from his immediate environment. Look, for instance, at the way I was brought up in school. We were punished for speaking our mother tongues in the school compounds. Take that for instance.

If you punish a child for speaking his mother tongue what are you really doing to the mentality of that child? You are really making him hate the language which was the basis of his humiliation, and by extension hate the values carried by that language and also dislike or look down upon the people who created a language that was the basis of his humiliation. This means that he was in fact distancing himself from himself and his immediate environment.

On the other hand, when anyone of us did very well in English language, we were praised very highly, were given very high marks, were given standing ovations. We became heroes. But then, what did that do to this child? Obviously, it made him look up to English language as the most important tool of one's being, and by extension it made him have positive attitudes toward the values, philosophy and culture carried by that language. And of course, by extension, he looked up to the people who created a language which was the basis of his new heroic status. In other words, a knowledge of English language became the standard of one's, or

the measure of one's intelligence and abilities. That one example shows you how one was alienated from one's own language, and was made to look externally to other people's language, values and the culture that the language carries.

Take another example: religion. Just as a matter of general attitude: if you look at religion it taught a child to know that which was farthest removed from himself. Even today you find African people or any people for that matter who have absorbed Christian doctrines; who know every single detail about heaven and god and Jesus Christ, and even about how people will be dressing, what kind of clothes people will be wearing in after-life — presumably white clothes, but they know nothing about what is in front of their eyes, what their eyes can see, what their ears can hear, what their fingers can touch. But that which their eyes cannot see, their ears cannot hear, their fingers cannot touch, they are sure of in every detail.

The same is true when it came to the teaching of geography; rocks and rivers of Europe first, nothing about rivers and the valleys and hills from our own countries. In history we know the whole history of England from the times of Queen Elizabeth through British victories in the Second World War. Very little about our own histories which in fact were often taught as if they started with the colonisation of Africa, and so on. With those few examples, you can see that they all had one object: to alienate oneself from one's immediate environment, and so by implication identify with Europe.

In my case, it became a shocking confrontation with that reality in 1977. Since 1961 I have been writing plays, novels in English language. And although my novels and plays were talking about the struggles of peasants and workers, nevertheless I found it necessary to express these struggles in a foreign language. When I started work at Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, and started working with peasants and factory workers for adult literacy and in theatre, I was naturally confronted with the issue of language. If you are working in a peasant community what language are you going to use? In this case, we chose the language of the immediate community in which we were working.

When we came to theatre it was the same question. If you are going to have plays and dramatic set sketches for people in the villages and so on, what language are you going to use? At the end, of course, we opted for the language of the community. But the moment we wrote our plays and dramatic sketches in that language, we came to the painful reality — or not-so surprising reality — that the peasants and factory workers knew much more about their language than we did. It was shocking to me when as they started taking the scripts and reading them, sometimes they would laugh at the awkward way in which we had used language. And they would comment and say, 'You are doing very well, you are trying very hard. But this is not how you use language. An old man does not speak like this. An old man uses this and that kind of proverb. Oh, you want that passage to have effect — these are the kind of images you use', and so on.

So now, I who had been previously a Professor of English and Literature at the University of Nairobi, was now being taught the ABC of my language, its operations, its images and how to use it effectively in the delineation of a character and the internal psychology of those characters.

Again, when it came to theatre, you had to ask yourself what content, and of

course we were to have the kind of theatre that reflected the real histories of the people. That is, their heroic struggles against colonial and neo-colonial oppressions. The moment we did this, and in a language which they understood, of course the rules were once again reversed. Because, obviously, the people knew their history much better than we did. Often some of the people who took part in our theatre were the very people who had actively participated in the Mau Mau guerilla warfare against the British colonial settler presence in Kenya.

Some of them had made guns, some of them had done intelligence work, others had done actual fighting, so they knew this history much better. And often, they would stop in the course of our discussion of a play and discuss among themselves the various reminiscences, or the various battles in which they had participated. And again we had to learn from the people. We were actually learning the history we had helped to create.

Again, when we came to write on contemporary problems of the workers in a modern factory, I discovered that I had never been in a factory in my life. So I was writing about factories and workers from a position of abstraction. Since the participants in our theatre were factory workers themselves, they were able to correct us on so many things. For instance, one worker was very surprised that in discussing one particular factory near our place, we had not mentioned that workers were killed by conditions in that factory, and that they had not been paid compensation for even some of the serious damages they had undergone while working with some of the dangerous gases in that factory. One worker literally slipped off his shirt to show us his body which was full of white and black blotches. And he told us he had not been paid compensation. Then he turned to us and said: 'Why have you left out this kind of reality in a factory?'

When it came to writing about exploitation, again we could only talk in generalities, abstractions. But they were able to work out by how much they were being exploited in that factory. The factory we used was a shoemaking factory. I remember one time when workers in a particular department said: 'Look, in one day, one morning, we from this particular factory are able to make enough shoes to pay for all the salaries of the 3,000 workers from the factory for a whole month. So, for whom are we working for the rest of 29 days?'

When later the play became successful, some of the people who came to see the play said it was very, very good indeed. 'But Ngugi and his colleague Wa Mirii were writing as if Karl Marx was born in that village'. The fact is, who knows much more about the conditions in which he is working, Karl Marx or the worker living in those conditions? Now you can see the alienation of our education — that a worker who is in a factory does not quite know enough about the conditions under which he is living; a peasant who is working in a plantation, or who is having his crops stolen by the middleman does not know the reality of the conditions in which he is living!

That is why for me, this work at the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in 1977 — although it led to my political detention for a year, and has led to subsequent problems with the Kenya neo-colonial regime — was so crucial. For me, it was a complete education, and I shall never regret having involved myself with the peasants and factory workers in Kamirithu in Kenya.

QUESTION: At what point in your life and work did you become convinced of

the necessity to consciously commit yourself to the cause of the people's struggles?

NGUGI: In a sense, it has always been instinctively there. My parents, like the parents of most of the people of my generation were peasants and they had taken part in the struggles of the people of Kenya. But I'll say that in terms of consciousness, this has been a gradual process, a process which is not complete even. In other words, I see it as a process which has been going on all the time, a process of self-liberation through immersion in the work of the people.

But of course, what has happened to me, as a result of that, for instance my political detention in 1977, and my subsequent problems with the current regime in Kenya — has convinced me more and more about the correctness of the positions I have taken artistically, in my work in theatre and fiction.

QUESTION: You are one of many intellectuals in Kenya who are facing severe repression and mounting persecution by the government. What is the crime of these intellectuals?

NGUGI: There's no doubt in my mind that Kenya has been a model neo-colony. By this, I mean that Kenya is a country whose people have had a heroic history of struggle: To the extent that they were, I think, through the Kenya 'Land and Freedom Army', among the first people in the British empire to wage a war for independence through armed struggle.

But at the same time, the British colonial regime in Kenya had managed to recruit an elite that had absorbed the outlook of the British ruling class. And this elite was given the dominant positions in administration, in all the key sectors, let's say, of the new independent regime. Now, it meant that Kenya, on acceding to independence, never actually broke with the colonial economic structures. And if you don't break your links with imperialism, then it means the same political and cultural problems that were there during the colonial era will continue during the neo-colonial era. In other words, if you don't break with the economic structures of colonialism, which means the exploitation of the vast majority of people, then politically such a regime will become more and more alienated from the people, because it will be doing exactly what the colonial state was doing. When a regime becomes more and more alienated from the people, it tends to become more and more repressive as a way of maintaining its dominant position in that country. That's what has happened to the Kenya regime.

All centres of democratic expression have been repressed. In Kenya, the regime cannot allow, does not theoretically allow more than five people to meet without a licence. In other words, theoretically, if more than five people were to meet without a licence they could be arrested. The fact that they are not arrested when five people are meeting, is not for lack of laws and power in the regime to do such a thing.

Another example. In Kenya, a theatre group has to be registered and even then, each play that they perform has to have the regime's licence. Now, the regime does not allow people to organise on their own terms, and the destruction of the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre open stage built by the people themselves, is an example of the regime's hatred of any initiatives taken by the people.

Parliament in Kenya, or the national assembly, has become no more than just a

mouth piece of the ruling regime. The University was the only centre, broadly speaking, of democratic expression. That is, the university, by purely maintaining the liberal bourgeois ideals of freedom of expression, the right to receive different opinions, was being seen as being more to the left, not because the university was actually moving to the left, but by the fact that the regime has been moving so far to the right that the liberal position, the liberal ideals of the university, were becoming, or were being seen as a threat to the regime.

So, I will say that the crime of all these people who are now in prison is really the fact that they expressed opinions that were seen to be different from that of the regime.

Let me give you an example. No country has a right to give its territory or to offer its territory as a military base to another country without consulting the people. And the Kenya regime has given the United States of America military facilities in Kenya, but the Kenyan people were not consulted; the Kenyan Parliament was not consulted. In fact up to now the Kenyan people have never been told officially that the regime has given the USA military facilities. Yet the American people have been told this by their Congress. So Americans could debate and have opinions on the military facilities offered their government by the Kenyan regime. But the Kenyan people who could be affected by the presence of the US military personnel in Kenya, were not consulted.

The regime has gone so far to the right as to become contemptuous of the people of Kenya as a whole. The regime has become completely anti-Kenyan in its stance, and this has been exemplified by this offering of Kenyan territory for American military use without consulting anybody in Kenya.

QUESTION: There are many young Africans, young students and intellectuals who find inspiration from your work and who face several obstacles in their desire to do artistic work for the people. What message do you have for them?

NGUGI: My advice here will be very simple. And that is, to go back to the people. When I say that, I mean literally that we have a lot to learn by working with the people in factories, in community centres, in the rural areas and so on. By working with the people, I mean directly working with the people. We have a lot to learn from our languages, from our philosophies and so on. When I say this, I don't mean this in an exclusive sense. I mean it is using our immediate environment as a base for our take-off, or as a base for our assimilation of whatever is necessary to our struggles.

Special Issue on Health

ROAPE is planning an Autumn 1985 issue on the political economy of health and related issues. Contributions are invited on such topics as: health and development, health and the state, health and the family. Ideally we would like the issue to cover a cross-section of geographical/linguistic zones, cases and political settings, as well as more theoretical pieces. Accounts of interesting innovations in health care in Africa are most welcome. Copy by the end of June, please, to the *ROAPE* office.