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IN MEMORIAM

Going Home: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

After nearly two decades of documenting Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's life and work, this reflection situates my conversations with him within a broader canvas—one that allows us to hear him in dialogue with fellow writers, activists, and global artists.

Résumé

Après près de vingt ans de documentation de la vie et de l'œuvre de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, cette réflexion positionne mes échanges avec lui dans un cadre plus vaste, nous offrant ainsi la possibilité de l'entendre dialoguer avec d'autres écrivains, activistes et artistes de renommée internationale.

Resumo

Sendo fruto de cerca de duas décadas dedicadas a documentar a vida e a obra de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, o presente texto é uma reflexão sobre as conversas que mantive com ele num contexto mais amplo — um contexto que nos permite ouvi-lo em diálogo com outros escritores, ativistas e artistas mundiais.

Keywords: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; Chinua Achebe; Ali A. Mazrui; memory; remembering

April 2013. We gathered in Binghamton, upstate New York, to celebrate Ali Mazrui's eightieth birthday. The celebrations had been planned to converge with a rare gathering of three African intellectuals: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Ali Mazrui. Two weeks before the event, on March 21, 2013, Achebe died.

At the event, Ngũgĩ started his speech with solemnity that held the room into stillness: "I was coming here to praise my countryman, Mwalimu Ali Mazrui, but the passing of my fellow writer, Chinua Achebe, who was supposed to be here in dialogue with us, changed the focus."

Silence. Deep, pure, and profound.

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Listening to the sound of silence, I wondered: what happens when the weight of loss is so palpable, yet guarded from extinguishing the glow of birthday candles?

Ngũgĩ paused. He looked at Mazrui and nodded. More silence.

Without cue, the room slipped into what I assumed could only be a shared moment of remembrance. I held my two cameras, turned the focus on the audience. The gravitas of what was unfolding could not be captured faithfully by a camera. It could only be felt.

Ngũgĩ and Achebe first met at the legendary conference of African writers of English expression held at Makerere, Uganda, in 1962. The conference was graced by a pan-African ensemble of writers. Their names became synonymous with the African Writers Series, a foundational literary outfit, which Achebe oversaw. Langston Hughes and Saunders Redding from the USA were at the conference, and so was Arthur Drayton from the Caribbean, giving the conference a global blackness outlook.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was the model text. Other writings of the time were measured against it. Ngũgĩ shared with me that when he published his first novel and the publisher needed his picture for the back cover of the novel, he looked for *Things Fall Apart* to see how Achebe had posed. He posed like Achebe. You see, our continent was confronting the throes of decolonial awakening while simultaneously searching for postcolonial possibilities. It was a continent in search of templates for its texts and tastes, postures and poses.

The work of this generation of writers became a passport to the crises of that new beginning. These works became our travel documents to other African countries and to their cultures. I tasted kola nuts, ate yams, and drank palm wine in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* long before I visited Lagos and Akure. I traveled on Nigerian's roads in Soyinka's play, *The Road*, long before I trotted to Abeokuta. The haggling for merchandise in Idumota is not different from that of Gikomba in my Nairobi. To know a country is to know its writers.

Mazrui was not at the 1962 conference. Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo represented Nigeria. Barely five years after the conference, the Biafran War started in Nigeria. Okigbo joined the forces fighting for the cessation of Biafra in 1969. He died in combat. Mazrui's only novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, is dedicated to him. General Yakubu Gowon was the Nigerian head of state during this moment of crises.

General Gowon was at Mazrui's eightieth birthday celebrations. I scheduled an interview with him.

"Who killed Christopher Okigbo," I asked.

Silence.

General Gowon's presence is not intimidating. I had watched him at the conference, mingling comfortably with other attendants. He was friendly. During this interview, he was composed. Then came my question. I felt the weight of this question immediately I verbalized it. General Gowon has a husky voice. It is not intimidating. But his eyes can be. And now they were. With his thumbs rubbing against each other, he started:

"As far as I am concerned, and as far as I know, we never had any report of Chris Okigbo in the field ... I was not responsible, or Nigeria was not responsible for his death."

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After asking a question during my interviews, I remain audibly silent. My questions are always very brief.

Silence.

The General continued. "Okigbo died in Cameroon, not in Nigeria."

This claim is not supported by any other source that I have interviewed in my search for Okigbo.

When Okigbo died, Achebe elegized his friend using a repetition that haunts:

For whom are we searching?
For whom are we searching?
For Okigbo we are searching.

Achebe was to revisit the Biafra experience in his last testament *There was a Country*. I asked Wole Soyinka about Achebe's last book. Achebe should not have written this book the way he did, Kongi said.

"It should have been written differently," he added. At the heart of this response is the memory question: what we remember, how we remember, and how we articulate what we remember. The past and the crises of Africa's present, in my view, is informed, and ultimately haunted, by this memory question.

As Biafra burned, Ngũgĩ's Kenya was unstoppably descending into disillusionment. The promises of a new dawn had diminished. Ngũgĩ, who had recently returned from Leeds University, and had joined the University of Nairobi, resigned in 1969. His grievances? Lack of academic freedom.

Ali Mazrui and David Cook facilitated a writing fellowship for Ngũgĩ at Makerere university. From Kampala, Ngũgĩ and Mazrui traveled to attend the Congress of Africanists in Dakar, Senegal. While on the way to Dakar, they conceived the idea to collaborate in writing the biography of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta. Kenya's state house shot down the idea.

In Dakar, and in the middle of the night, Ngũgĩ suffered an almost fatal asthma attack. He crawled from his room to the front desk. He barely managed to scribble the name Ali Mazrui. It worked. Mazrui was called and organized for Ngũgĩ to be rushed to the hospital.

Mazrui once reminded me that "Ngũgĩ is Kenya's gift to literature." I shared this with Ngũgĩ. He was flattered. Then came his response: "Mazrui is a political scientist with a literary bent. I am a literary artist with a political bent."

Back to Binghamton. Mazrui's eightieth birthday. Something else was happening in Kenya at the time. The International Criminal Court had summoned six Kenyans to the Hague for allegedly committing crimes against humanity.

The then president, Uhuru Kenyatta, was one of those summoned. As Mazrui's birthday candles continued to glow, he compared Uhuru Kenyatta's summon by a Western court to the trial of his father, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, by a British court in Kapenguria. One of Jomo Kenyatta's lawyers was Dudley Thompson, a Jamaican legal scholar and diplomat. Dudley Thompson was a friend to many Africa's founding fathers—our Nkrumahs and Nyereres.

Dudley Thompson died in 2012, a year before Mazrui's eightieth birthday.

"Dudley Thompson joined me every year at the African Studies Association conference," Mazrui began.

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> He was the lawyer for the trial of Jomo Kenyatta in 1952/53, in Kapenguria. In Kenya, more than half a century later, the son of Kenyatta, Uhuru Kenyatta, has been elected president of Kenya. Like his father, Uhuru Kenyatta has been accused of instigating violence but instead of a colonial British court charging the older Kenyatta, we have the International Criminal Court charging the younger Kenyatta. The older Kenyatta was unjustly imprisoned by a colonial court, the younger Kenyatta is unlikely to be found guilty by the Hague. Unfortunately, Dudley Thompson is not alive to be counsel for the defense in the trial of Uhuru Kenyatta.

Mazrui was a master of paradoxes.

Ngũgĩ concluded his speech equally powerful, paying tribute to Achebe while celebrating Mazrui: "One iroko tree has fallen but the other still stands strong among us."

Mazrui died the year that followed, October 12, 2014. Ngũgĩ called me.

"Mazrui made Kenya and Africa visible in the highest echelons of intellectual production," he started. "I am glad to have witnessed his intellectual performance at the height of his powers. He shone; he dazzled; he enlightened."

More than a decade later, Ngũgĩ has joined his country man, Ali Mazrui, and his fellow writer, Chinua Achebe.

In August 2023, I visited Ngũgĩ in California. He shared with me a remarkable body of unpublished poems in Gikuyu. I spent several days recording him as he read them. In this unpublished trove is a collection titled *Going Home: Poems for the Departed.*

This poignant collection honors and remembers Nelson Mandela, Nadine Gordimer, Maya Angelou, Kofi Awoonor, Francis Imbuga, Micere Githae Mugo, and Chinua Achebe.

Following Ngũgĩ's passing, the digital skies were flooded with glowing tributes from all corners of the world.

The tributes read like one unending *going home* poem for Ngũgĩ.

Ngũgĩ, son of Thiong'o and Wanjiku.

Going home.

Author Biographies. **Ndirangu Wachanga** is Full Professor of media and information science at University of Wisconsin. Wachanga is the authorized documentary biographer of Ali A. Mazrui, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Micere Githae Mugo. He has produced award-winning documentary biographies of key African scholars and thinkers. His documentary on Ali A. Mazrui – *A Walking Triple Heritage* – won the New York African Studies Association Book Award in 2015. He has published several books, journal articles, and has written for different media outlets globally. Wachanga is a regular commentator for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA). Africa's culture of letters has been strengthened by Wachanga's growing archival work on Africa's Writing. His https://www.wachangaproductions.com is an important media library for African voices and memories.

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